



KNIGHT SCHOOL

The joy of jousting may be obsolete, but at Warwick Riding School it's lances at dawn for anyone brave enough to indulge in the ancient art of the Knights of Middle England

PHOTO BY LORD TONY LE FRENCH

FOR SOMEONE WHOSE LAST EXPERIENCE OF A HORSE WAS FALLING OFF A BAD TEMPERED PONY WHEN THEY WERE EIGHT YEARS

old, finding myself astride one, galloping head-on towards an armour-clad knight while wielding a 12-foot-long lance should be terrifying. But, strangely enough, as I race down the tilt, great clumps of earth rising behind me, I'm actually starting to believe I can pull this off. I aim for my adversary's shield and manage a glancing blow. There's not enough power to unsettle or even slightly faze him, but as I wheel my horse round and make ready for another run I'm beginning to think I might get the hang of this jousting lark.

At the 40-acre Warwick International Riding School in the UK, you can learn the ancient art with The Knights of Middle England. Owner Karl Ude-Martinez along with his team of instructors, most of whom are professional horse riders or stuntmen, has recreated an authentic medieval arena complete with a List (the field of combat), Tilt, (the fence between the two jousts) and Quintaines (hanging wooden dummies on which to practice the art) on which amateurs can become Knights for a day.

And even if, like me, your riding experience is non-existent, you can still act out your Knights of The Round Table fantasies. "We can take someone who hasn't ever been on a horse and have them Jousting by the afternoon," explains Karl. "They might not be going full-tilt but they'll get the feel of what it was like to be a real knight taking part in a tournament. Plus, where else do you get to try and hit people with 12-foot poles?"



Before their widespread use, Knights were the medieval equivalent of a modern air force

Jousting arrived in Britain with the Norman Conquest. At first, little more than organized score-settling between competing bands of Noblemen, it rapidly grew into grand tournaments with hundreds of Knights taking part in day-long events. Men who were great on the List could attain superstar status and a Formula 1-like circuits of contests sprang up across Europe. But its very popularity would cause it a long line of problems.

Deaths were common, injuries even more so. And in a world where nations

relied on their Knights for military prowess losing great swathes of your army due to horseplay with long sticks didn't go down too well. It was frequently banned by royal edict, and in the 13th Century even the church weighed in, declaring that anyone killed taking part, "would be denied a Christian burial". The logic being that if you were going to die fighting, it'd better be on a Crusade and not trying to be the Middle Ages equivalent of Lewis Hamilton.

But what finally did it for Jousting was the rise of firearms. Before their widespread use, Knights were the medieval battlefield's equivalent of a modern air force. Highly trained, heavily armed and almost impossible to defend

against. The gun changed all that; a peasant with a musket was as effective as noblemen with 10 years martial training. Its failed was sealed.

Thankfully, today there won't be any scurvy knaves taking pot-shots at us, the greatest danger being falling off one of the horses, which Karl assures me and my fellow trainees is very rare. "The horses know what they're doing, we've trained them to do this."

Jousting is making a comeback and has even been made the national sport of Maryland. Karl has a theory about this renaissance: "I think it's especially inbuilt into the nature of Britain. It's the whole Knight performing chivalrous deeds ideal. Who wouldn't feel good doing that?"

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Jousting Jaunts

- There are many jousting tournaments held each year across Europe. The largest, with 120,000 visitors, is The Ritterturnier, held each June in Kaltenberg, Germany. For those wanting to taste the authentic Middle Ages experience it also has a food and drink market selling authentic medieval products.

www.ritterturnier.de/ust/default.asp

- The oldest Joust tournament, The Jousting of the Saracens, held annually since 1260, takes place in Arezzo, Italy each September, www.lagiostradelsaracino.it



The idea behind jousting is simple—knock off or hit your opponent with the lance for points

The morning begins for me and my fellow would-be Knights with a quick lesson in basic horsemanship and then it's on to the proper training. We're kitted out with lances and medieval jerkins and led on to the List. I'm slightly disappointed that I won't be getting my own suit of armour till Karl points out it'd cost around £10,000 and I'd be liable for any damage.

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Knight Facts

- Knights trained from the age of seven, and as well as learning combat were taught music, poetry and how to act gallantly towards a beaten foe.
- The average suit of armour weighed around 27 kilos; far less than the 90 kilos of equipment modern Special Forces troops are expected to carry.
- The last wartime charge with lances was made during World War II by the Polish Cavalry.
- The word "chivalrous" comes from the French word for knight, Chevalier.

PHOTO: © LORD TONY LE FRENCH

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the side angle required, which would see you hitting mid air or if unlucky enough to strike a hard blow, would push you backwards off the horse.

My first few attempts go badly. It's like trying to drive a car with a pole stuck through the window and spear a pizza box off the back of a passing motorbike. But with Karl and his Knights' encouragement I slowly improve, and by the late afternoon I'm deemed fit along with the rest of the trainees, now divided into a rival team, to take my place in the tournament. It's time to put everything I've learnt into practice.

Unfortunately for my side who have taken to it like they've been doing it for years, I'm no King Arthur. I can just about manage to strike blows as I trot down the tilt but they carry all the force of a sickly kitten. Despite my poor showing, our team still manage to best our opponents and are crowned champions.

Karl insists he can see a promising future for my knightly career, "With some training you'd have the makings of a fine knight," I ask him exactly how much training. He thinks for a second and smiles, "Oh, about every day for the next 6 months."

A days jousting costs from £199 and can be booked through Red Letter Days on 0845 640 8000 or www.redletterdays.co.uk. For private tuition visit www.knights of middleengland.co.uk

